

## **European Dramas and Ankiya Nats (One-Act play) of Srimanta Sankardeva in Assamese Literature: A Comparative Study**

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*Abstract*-Theatrical practice in England in the medieval period was intimately connected to the life style and social condition of the people. The main form of the medieval drama was religious and they were popularly known as the mysterious plays, miracle plays and morality plays – mostly portrayed biblical story or account of the life of a saint or the dramatization of the abstract states. During the later part of the same medieval period, Sankardeva – the great preacher of Vaisnavism in Assam – had composed religious and moral plays known as Ankiya Nat (one-act play) based on the epics or the Puranas. The main purpose of these plays was to instil into the hearts of the audience the message of ‘\_bhakti’ (loving devotion to God). The present paper is an attempt to explore the similarities of the Ankiya Nats with that of the medieval European dramas. The study shows that the Ankiya plays of Assam and the medieval plays of the West reveal some identical features despite the immense difference of space.

**Keywords:** Ankiya Nat, One-Act play, Medieval drama, Mystery plays, Morality plays, Sankardeva.

### **Introduction**

Medieval European drama (roughly 10th–16th centuries) evolved from religious rituals and liturgical performances into more complex plays, including morality plays, mystery cycles, and secular farces. relates to the drama of the period between the decline of the Western Roman Empire in the 5th century A.D. and the starting point of the Renaissance in the 15th century A.D. The Dark Age covers all plays generated in Europe over the thousand year and indicates to various categories such as liturgical dramas, mystery and morality plays, masques and farces. In the 10th century, starting with Hrosvitha of Gandersheim, Medieval theatre was for the most part very religious and ethical in its essence, staging and conventions. The best outstanding instances of the Dark Age theatre are the English cycle plays. The chronicle of Indian drama is expanded over various centuries. The early glance be witnessed in the primitive cave paintings. The archeological discoveries concerned with Indus Valley Civilization that prove to its existence in Vedic and Buddhist literature. Existent of the earliest dramatic deeds belong to the 4th century B.C. During the Gupta period, the Indian play touched its pinnacle with Kalidas. Dramaturigists in India regarded theatre as an all-embracing life-size art. Bharata Muni observed —there is no wise maxim, no learning, no art, no craft, no devise, no action that is not found in the dramall (Muni, 1951: 116). It had been regarded as the most prominent art and a meeting ground of all kinds of arts and sciences.

In medieval India, various dramatic institutions were practiced in different regions of the country. A few of them may be mentioned as Yaksagana of Karnataka, Kathakali of Kerala, Terrukutta and Bhagavata-mela Nataka of Tamilnadu, Bhavai of Gujrat, Lalita of Maharastra, Rasa-lila and Ram-lila of Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, and Yatra of Bengal. It is true that there are some resemblances between the ankiya nat (one-act play) of Assam and these dramatic shows. Archana Bhattacharjee (2011) stated: Sankardev was a much-travelled man, he must have been familiar with such dramatic entertainments as Ramlila, Rashlila, Yatra, Kathaka, Yaksagana, Bhagavatam and Bhawai, popular at that time in other parts of

India. On the other hand, there were such rudiments of dramatic entertainments in Assam as Deodhoni-nac, Putala-nac, and Oja-pali performances. (p.1) Though the history of Assamese literature started with the Charyapadas, Sankardeva – the great dramatist, poet, philosopher, song composer, and social reformer and priest of the neo-Vaishnavite class – was the guiding as well as the inspiring pioneer of the orderly chronicle of Assamese literature. He entered into the arena of culture, religion and literature and began penning in heterogeneous genres. Besides the Harichandra Upakhyan Kavya, Rukminitarana Kavya, Kurukshetra Kavya, Balichalan Kavya, Amrit Manthan Kavya, Bhakti Pradip, Anadi Patan, Nimi-Navasiddha Sambad, Kirtana-Ghosha and the Borgits, he had in his credit six dramas viz. Kali-damana (Subjugation of Serpent Kali), Patni-prasada (Favour to Wives), Rasa-krida or Keli-Gopala (Sport with the milkmaids), Rukmini-harana (Abduction of Rukmini), Parijata-haran (The Theft of the Flower Parijata) and Rama-vijaya (The Conquest of Rama). With the few dramas of Sankardeva, it was for the first time Assamese dramatic literature began as early as the first half of the sixteenth century. He emerged and stood as the guiding and inspiring spirit to see a band of poets and dramatists and composers of songs, making their powerful entrance into the arena of literature, culture and religion. As the themes of the medieval drama was based on religion and morality and the same is applicable to ankiya nat (one-act play) of Sankardeva, this article endeavours to find out the similarities between the medieval drama and the ankiya nats of Sankardeva.

The Ankiya Nat (One-Act play) Formal history of Assamese drama started with Srimanta Sankardeva (1449—1568). His plays are described as Ankiya Nats, not by himself, but by the posterity. Sankardeva never called his plays as Ankiya Nats. Instead, he described his plays as nat, natak, yatra, and anka. Ramcharan Thakur, the third generation disciple, might have named the plays of the Master with the adjectival form of anka. Sankardeva was the first Indian dramatist of the medieval time. Sankardeva made drama as an instrument for the establishment of his bhakti drama, being described as eka sarana nama dharma (shelter in one religion) or eka sarana-bhagavata dharma. He was the first dramatist of medieval India to write drama in a language that does not belong to any specific place or people. He wrote in Brajabuli, regularly dotted with Sanskrit slokas and Brajabuli songs. Gahan Chandra Mahanta (2004) observed, —the plays of Sankardeva are interspersed with beautiful Sanskrit verses composed in diverse metres (p.127). Sanskrit part was for the learned audience, while Brajabuli was for the common masses. Projesh Banerjee (1983) remarked, —Sankardeva preferred to produce his compositions in the dialect of his land, because that was the only language in which he could transport his message to his countrymen, which they could follow properly (p.82). Sankardeva created a form of religious play known as Ankiya Nat. The meaning Ankiya is ‘act’ or ‘episode’ and Nata indicates ‘play’. Hence, Ankiya Nata implies a ‘one-act’ play and it has a particular mode of construction. Sankardeva wrote many plays for spreading the tenets of Vaisnavism among the masses. Ankiya Nata can be compared with the North Indian Ramlila and Rasalila, Tamil Nadu’s Bhagavata Mela, Kerala’s Krishnattam, and Orissa’s Prahlada Natakam.

### A Comparative Study

It has already been seen that Assamese drama also had its origin in the religion of the time. The motive of Sankardeva in writing Ankiya Nat was mainly religious rather than secular. The playwright’s aim was to teach the audience about the principles of Vaisnavism through stage presentation before them the activities of Krishna and Rama. The stories are taken from the epics or the Puranas where the activities of Krishna and Rama are glorified and their superiority to all other gods and goddesses is asserted. According to Maheswar Neog (1965)

The Namghar or prayer-hall played almost the same role as that of the Church in medieval Europe. The medieval mystery, miracle and morality plays were performed in and around churches. In spite of its emphasis on the sinfulness of acting and travelling performances, the medieval church acted as instrument to revive the Medieval theatre. Much in the same way, performances of the ankiya nat took place in a prayer hall or in temporary pandals built around it. The Church, as is well known, was everything for the Middle Ages in Europe. In the same way, it can be said that religion was everything for the Assam of Sankardeva's time, the dominating faith being Vaisnavism, the cult of Krishna worship.

These plays usually performed by the great guilds, must have been acted without scenery, or with scenery of a most crude kind; but much importance was given to costuming even though it might be of a grotesque and primitive sort. In the same way, —the ankiya plays were also performed by the different khels or guilds, which laid great emphasis on elaborate costuming and make up (Mahanta, 1985: 23). The actors in the mystery plays —were all amateurs — members of the various companies who for a time put aside their labour to perform in the sacred mysteries (Nicoll, 1978: 27). In the same way, Assamese acting was also the work of amateurs — actors drawn from the villagers usually during the recess after harvesting. The ankiya plays may also be said to have some resemblance with the morality play. The characters are almost abstract and not legendary or scriptural figures. They were, as the name implies, are moral plays showing the victory of good and defeat of evil. The cardinal feature of nearly all the moralities was the pursuit of Everyman by evil forces and his rescue by Conscience or Wisdom. In the ankiya plays, Krishna or Rama, on the one hand, and characters like Sisupala and the Asuras or demons, on the other hand, may very well be considered as symbolic of good and evil respectively, the latter being routed by the former. —Ankiya Nat is primarily a religious institution. Besides entertaining the audience, the Bhaona attracted their minds towards the Vaishnavite Bhagwati Dharma (religious faith) (Borthakur, 2020: 10)

### Conclusion

It has been observed that the European drama of the later medieval period and the drama of Srimanta Sankardeva were very popular institutions. These popular institutions were intended for the people, executed for the masses and received pleasure by the peeps. Despite the features of a medieval play, the dramas of Sankardeva unfurl certain characteristics of a modern play. Sankardeva wrote and enacted his own concept of social equality through bhakti and submissiveness only to Lord Krishna. Sri Krishna always stood beside the poor and the oppressed. His incarnations are meant for the emancipation of men from the bondage of slavery, drudgery, oppressions and repressions worked out by the repressive agencies and evil forces. To conclude, in the words of Pona Mahanta (1985), —although the ankiya nat was developed largely out of indigenous materials, Sanskrit drama and dramaturgy also influenced the playwright to a great extent much in the same way as English drama in its early stages was influenced by the dramas of Greece and Rome (p.20).

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